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# Planned ICC tolls too high, foes say

Proposed highway  
could cost drivers  
up to \$1,500 a year

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SUN REPORTER

A proposed east-west highway through the Washington suburbs would cost up to \$1,500 a year in tolls for a daily rush-hour commuter, making the road too costly for many middle-income Marylanders to use, opponents of the project said yesterday.

Foes of the planned Intercounty Connector, the Ehrlich administration's top transportation priority, said the 18-mile road connecting Interstates 270 and 95 is a bad deal for taxpayers.

"It won't be accessible to a lot of people if the state's planned tolls go into effect," said Montgomery County Councilman Phil Andrews, who held a news conference with other ICC foes in Rockville yesterday to call attention to the state's toll projections.

State Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan dismissed the comments as those of a minority of Marylanders who "just don't want it built."

He said that such criticism "demeans working men and women whose time is valuable to them," and that the projected tolls compare favorably with the fares on Washington's Metro system.

The opponents' volley against the ICC tolls is based on state figures contained in a draft environmental impact statement released late last year. A final version of the doc-

ument is expected to be issued in the next few weeks.

Andrews said the ICC's detractors are calling attention to the figures now because state officials "buried" the projections in the 8,000-page document.

From the time Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. revived plans for the ICC shortly after taking office in 2003, administration officials have said that tolls — and bonds backed by that projected income — would play a vital role in financing construction of the highway through Prince George's and Montgomery counties. Flanagan has said tolls would vary depending on the volume of traffic to control congestion.

The draft statement shows the state projected ICC tolls at three levels — 13, 17 and 26 cents a mile. It identifies the 17-cent level as the 2004 "baseline," with a projected toll of 20 cents a mile by the projected opening in 2010.

Andrews said the 17-cent rate would amount to \$6 a day for a round-trip, end-to-end user — or about \$1,500 a year.

"If you're earning \$40,000 a year and taking home \$30,000 a year, that's 5 percent of your take-home pay," he said.

The fares for going less than the full distance from the I-95 corridor to I-270 would be lower.

Andrews, a Democrat, is a long-time ICC opponent whose position has put him at odds with Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan and the council majority. He was joined at the news conference by Del. Adrienne A. Mandel, a Montgomery Democrat and Councilwoman Marilyn Praeger, among others.

Andrews said a 17-cent-a-mile toll on the ICC would be significantly higher than those on other toll roads in the region. He noted a 6-cent-a-mile toll on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and a 5-cent-a-mile toll on the New Jersey Turnpike.

But those highways are decades old and were paid for long ago. Peter Samuel, editor and publisher of the Frederick-based *Toll Roads Newsletter*, said the tolls on those highways are largely used for maintenance rather than construction.

"The old ones are always cheaper than the new ones," he said, noting Delaware as an exception. "You just can't build new roads and charge the same price the old ones can charge."

Samuel said the rates being projected for the ICC are not out of line with those on other, more-recently-opened toll roads. He said a newer toll road in California charges up to 75 cents a mile at peak congestion.

As a road through a busy urban area, the ICC would probably be able to charge higher tolls than proposed in the draft, Samuel said.

Flanagan disputed the contention that the projected ICC tolls are excessive.

"The cost to go the entire length of the Intercounty Connector is less than the cost to take the Washington subway system," he said. "Nobody is criticizing the fares on the Washington subway system, and they shouldn't be criticizing the fares on the ICC."

(Flanagan's comparison is accurate in certain cases — for instance, a maximum-distance ride on the Metro at peak times vs. a one-way ICC trip — but not others.)

Flanagan said the per-mile projections for the ICC were based on comparisons with other regional toll roads such as the Dulles Greenway in Northern Virginia (19 cents on weekdays) and 17 cents to 25 cents on the Pocahontas Parkway in Richmond. He noted that the \$3 toll on the

11-mile Delaware Turnpike comes to 27 cents a mile.

Flanagan said the final environmental impact statement on the ICC is "in the final works." He said he's confident that it will recommend construction of the road, which is projected to cost \$2.4 billion.

After the final statement, the proposal will be open for a new round of public comments before the federal government makes its final decision.

Flanagan said the plan is on track to begin work next year — when Ehrlich will be up for reelection — but allowed that the

first projects launched may be environmental improvements designed to mitigate the impact of the ICC.

Even if the highway faces court challenges, the administration will hold a 2006 groundbreaking of some kind, Flanagan said.

"We've earned it," he said.

(Please see ICC, 6A)